

Stomp the Yard, School Daze,
and the Cultural Politics of
Black Greek-Letter Organizations

Theta represents the elite of every aspect of Black life. We are only as strong as our weakest link. A fraternity is a major, life-long bond.

—Big Brother Sylvester, *Stomp the Yard*

All this talk about tradition means you cannot keep up with the present.

—DJ, Theta pledge, *Stomp the Yard*

Being in a fraternity is about more than just stepping.

—April, DJ's "object" of desire and campus socialite,
Stomp the Yard

Sony Pictures, in 2007, released the first film of the twenty-first century to employ the cultural practices of Black Greek-letter organizations (BGLOs) as an example of how the hip-hop generation negotiates college life, socioeconomic class, and cultural meanings. The film's title, *Stomp the Yard*, presents one of the principal practices of BLGOs—stepping—as a metaphor for the struggle over the meaning of Blackness. Stepping is a form of dance that relies on a mixture of African aesthetics, vernacular language systems, and intricate body movements; it is an example of Black Americans' distinct and transformed cultural practices. *Stomp the Yard's* protagonist and soon-to-be-stepper-extraordinaire, DJ Williams, is a working-class, first-year college

student, and a skilled street dancer from an urban environment. Still scarred by the recent and brutal death of his brother after a dance-off competition gone wrong, DJ cultivates a guarded persona and guarded heart, while remaining skeptical of one of the primary social aspects of Black college life: BGLOs. His skepticism strengthens once he recognizes that the object of his affection, a female student named April, is also the girlfriend of a pompous and irrationally jealous fraternity brother. After he is coaxed into pledging Theta Nu Theta fraternity because his dance skills are expected to help the Thetas win a step competition, however, DJ slowly begins to realize that the skills that once brought him monetary gain on the streets, that is, improvisational dance, had the ability to serve other purposes. The film's romantic heroine, April, adds to DJ's change of heart about fraternity life when she informs him that being in a BGLO entails *more* than stepping. *Stomp the Yard* is successful in its presentation of stepping as a cultural, social, and political sign of Blackness for BGLOs. However, the totality of *Stomp the Yard's* narrative does not assert April's claim.

Stomp the Yard is a coming-of-age story, urban drama, and romantic tryst all in one, which exposes mainstream America to the microcosmic world of the Black public sphere as envisaged through Black college life. Not unlike Spike Lee's film *School Daze* (1988), released nineteen years earlier, director Sylvain White's *Stomp the Yard* is less a thorough examination of BGLOs than a film that uses the organizations as an opportunity to show how African American men define and struggle over the meaning of Blackness, class, and sexuality on college campuses. For DJ and the rival Mu Gamma Xi fraternity member Grant (who is April's current boyfriend), stepping is the site where Black men work through and negotiate this struggle, and April is the prize of successful masculinity. As I have written elsewhere in my cinematic analysis of the film *School Daze*, the latter film also presents a similar troubling scenario to spectators through its *mise en scene* and narrative.¹

Stomp the Yard therefore shows stepping and BGLO life as a masculine terrain where women are objects for ownership or commodities to buy and fight over. Given this masculine framework and oversight, the Black sorority may appear as an

unimaginable site to articulate similar shifts and cleavages in the understandings of culture, class, and gender. *Stomp the Yard* and *School Daze* fail to provide a visual or narrative window into how one might situate sorority life for Black women within these discourses, but both films offer an opportunity, through their exposure of BGLO life to a mass audience, for such a conversation to begin.

This book argues through a case study on Alpha Kappa Alpha that the sorority's work in the Black public sphere illuminates the specificity, complexity, and diversity of Black cultural practices, and that their ongoing efforts toward political mobilization and social change in the Black public sphere represent a vital political practice. Its arguments are in part a response and challenge to BGLO presentation in *Stomp the Yard* and the type of caricatures in Lee's *School Daze*. Lee, in his representation of Black Greek life, presents two diametrically opposed views on Black culture and perceptions of self in *School Daze*: the haves and the have-nots. The haves are the Wannabe characters, beige to light-brown-hued men and women who are members of two fictional organizations: the Gammites (fraternity) and the Gamma Rays (little sister sorority). The Gammites and Gamma Rays are color conscious, flaunt crass materialism, are politically (a)pathetic, are presented as a mimicry of White fraternal members, and spend the majority of their time engaging in unproductive hazing and pledging rituals. Lee calls the have-nots the Jigaboos. These dark-brown-hued college students are Afrocentric and politically focused; they commit their energy and activities to demanding that their college, the fictitious and historically Black Mission College, financially divest itself from South Africa. *School Daze* explores the following question: In what ways do BGLOs, which claim to uplift their communities, find themselves trapped within their own color biases and class elitism, where the masses of Black Americans suffer as a result?

If *Stomp the Yard* is the hip-hop generation's version of Black life in the twenty-first century, then *School Daze* is the epitome of the narcissistic and materially motivated generation often associated with the Reagan-Bush years of the late twentieth century. One of the actors in the film, Roger Smith, who played one of

the Gammite roles, comments about *Schools Daze's* documentation of BGLOs in the 1980s: "I have this great theory that *School Daze*, the film, will prove to be a very interesting comment on culture. Here's the example: The Gammites, the pledges who are supposedly Wannabes, are perhaps the most African men on campus, culturally that is; their sense of kinship, bonding, their sense of movement, rhythm, the chants, call and response, addressing the elders. It's all very African. They've got all this happening, but they see themselves as Greeks."²

Smith focuses on the fraternity men representing contradictory forms of ethnic identity. For Smith, to inhabit the space of a Greek-letter organization mutes the diasporic element of BGLOs' cultural formation. A Greek letter identity is incommensurate with a Black ethnic identity—the two cannot coexist without one having to give—something implied when he says that the organizations "are the most African" but "see themselves as Greek." This position on culture denies the power and prevalence of cultural hybridity, but it also romanticizes what the actor praises as essentially cultural/African (written as masculine) while remaining detached from the reality of the historical formation of identity and cultural change. However, my research reveals that for AKA, a Greek-letter sorority is a site where African diasporic identities are created, negotiated, performed, transformed, and lived through everyday life experiences, not one where cultural identity is relinquished, lost, and assimilated. *Stomp the Yard* and *School Daze* are refractive illustrations of modern-day BGLOs, but little scholarship to date explores how the participation in these groups grew out of a complex set of color, class, culture, sexual, and gender arrangements.

*The Process of Distinction: Color, Class, and
Sexualities in Black Greek-Letter Organizations*

Given the historical relevancy and relational aspects of culture, any analysis of a particular subculture should ideally begin by establishing the cultural formations and movements that took part in shaping its emergence. Although Spike Lee's *School Daze*

insinuates that BGLOs are mimics of their white counterparts, Greek-letter organizations represented the most visible social option available to the large majority of college students throughout the twentieth century. Participation in the Greek system for Black Americans allowed them to function, in the eyes of White college administrators, as legitimate and recognizable college organizations.

Legitimization was not the sole reason for their formation. BGLOs are an example of a body of women and men who utilized an existing social space and skillfully transformed it for their own political purposes. Inasmuch as the newly forming BGLOs are a part of a historical movement among Black Americans of cultural and political work through social institutions, fraternals, and secret societies, these organizations were akin to the well-formed cultural fraternals that existed throughout the African diaspora. Today, these fraternals fall under the historically Black, collegiate, umbrella organization the National Pan-Hellenic Council (NPHC). The organizations are as follows: Alpha Phi Alpha (fraternity founded in 1906), Alpha Kappa Alpha (sorority founded in 1908), Kappa Alpha Psi (fraternity founded in 1911), Omega Psi Phi (fraternity founded in 1911), Delta Sigma Theta (sorority founded in 1913), Phi Beta Sigma (fraternity founded in 1914), Zeta Phi Beta (sorority founded in 1920), Sigma Gamma Rho (sorority founded in 1922), and Iota Phi Theta (fraternity founded in 1963).

The development of BGLOs was a product of the diverse social and cultural circumstances that each group faced. While Alpha Phi Alpha's, Kappa Alpha Psi's, and Sigma Gamma Rho's formation took place at predominately White colleges (Cornell, Indiana, and Butler universities, respectively,) AKAs, Omega Psi Phi's, Delta Sigma Theta's, Phi Beta Sigma's, and Zeta Phi Beta's formation took place at the historically Black college Howard University. The site of their emergence had a direct bearing upon their organizational structure and the ensuing cultural, social, and political consciousness each developed independently, and later collectively, when the NPHC formed in 1929.³ Predominantly White and historically Black colleges had different educational goals. Indeed, historical developments and social

structures shaped their organizational character. Historically Black colleges provided Black American students with the opportunity to attain a higher education, because many White colleges would not admit Black American students due to segregation in the United States and discriminatory admissions policies solely on the basis of race. Historically Black colleges were more often than not the only choice for people of African descent in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.⁴ White college institutions were used as an apparatus to perpetuate White and, often, male privilege (White women, ethno-religious groups, and other people of color, too, faced barriers to university admission in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries). In contrast, historically Black colleges opened up educational opportunity structures previously closed to Black American women and men.

At the turn of the twentieth century, both college formations encapsulated political ideologies that leaned toward forms of liberal democracy and conservative accommodation. At the historically Black colleges such as Howard, where the president was White until the early mid-twentieth century, these institutions were hardly bastions of radical politics open to the culture and presence of the masses of Black Americans. An example of this was in 1922, when the White president of Howard University, J. Stanley Durkee, proclaimed that the Black American theater productions students hoped to bring to campus were culturally inappropriate because of their focus on African folk cultural idioms. Black conservative administrators and professors at Howard shared this sentiment, too, until the mid-1950s.⁵ Howard University, founded a few years after the end of the American shame of slavery, began to serve the growing Black American middle- to upper-middle classes. Further, until the 1920s, reportedly 80 percent of the student population at Howard and many other historically Black colleges, including Wilberforce University (Ohio), Spelman College, and Fisk University (Tennessee), and Hampton Institute (Virginia), were allegedly of a light-skin complexion. The color makeup of some historically Black colleges, at least in the first part of the twentieth century, suggested a dependent relationship between light skin color, class advantage, and higher education.⁶

*Entanglements of Distinction: Elitism,
Colorism, and Fraternal Formations*

Colorism—the counterproductive practice of skin color bias practiced by the broad and full spectrum of skin gradations in African American, White, and all communities of color—is a specter that haunts BGLOs. In addition, an obsessive discourse propagated in BGLO history books about members constituting the “first” among those within African America to achieve doctorates, political office, and majority representation in regarded professions reads as elitist rhetoric. In their defense, BGLOs insist that only the most academically sound- and leadership-minded individuals gain membership, and that hue was never a criterion. As one member responded to the accusation of elitism and exclusion in the educational publication, the *Black Collegian*, “We are elitist in that we strive for academic achievement. We are exclusionary in that our membership is limited to those matriculated in a four-year university.”⁷ AKA member Ellen mirrored this stance during an interview session for this book; she compares BGLO selection to the criterion used in society at large concerning social and organizational “fit.” She defends BGLOs in their insular practices as being congruent with the protection of family units, and she insists that their self-discipline and exclusion is in the name of investing in their organization and communities:

To attend a top university you are evaluated heavily, to get a promotion at work you are put to the test. These things are done to separate the weak from the strong. To me sororities are the same. Just like in a family unit, when you have invested so much time and dedication into a child’s future, you refuse to let outside entities tear it apart. The sorority is the same way. We take care of our own. We teach our own. We refuse to settle for anything less than the goals we have set out to accomplish. So if we are misinterpreted for defending our investments in ourselves, our families, or communities, then several professional institutions need to reevaluate their own guidelines and regulations before commenting on ours.⁸

Nonfraternal members, however, argue that in the past, BGLOs' selection process for members was indeed color coded and similar to the social fraternals, such as the Links, Girl Friends, and the Boulé.⁹ At the turn of the century, social fraternals among Black Americans, sometimes benevolent but not formed with the sole intent of providing mutual aid for members or their communities, emerged within middle- to upper-middle-class enclaves in the East and Midwest regions of the United States. One generation removed from slavery, the social fraternals represented and created a space for the emerging Black professional class to socialize. The most popular and well known were the sororal groups the Links and the Girl Friends (1945, 1927), the fraternal groups the Boulé (also known as Sigma Pi Phi) and Guardsmen (1904, 1933), and the adolescent social club Jack and Jill (1938), all of which remain active today.¹⁰ The controversy over the early- to mid-twentieth-century social fraternal and sororal groups within the Black American community was rooted in membership barriers based on color and class. In the first half of the twentieth century, physical attributes and class position were important criteria for entrance into the chapters of many of these groups.

Allegations of colorism among social fraternities and sororities, especially the aforementioned five, are widespread. Accusations exist that many of these organizations administered "paper bag tests," whereby members could not have skin darker than the color of a beige paper bag. Black social fraternals thus operated much like the blue vein secret societies among Black Americans that were prominent in the South and Eastern regions of the United States, where the veins of potential members had to show through their skin and a comb had to glide through their hair without snarling in order to qualify for membership. These markers of whiteness—fair skin and straight or loosely curled hair—held great aesthetic capital for a number of members and chapters, thus adding another layer of exclusivity for the organizations.¹¹

One might explain colorism, classism, and other forms of intracultural prejudice among these groups as internal oppression, where the hailing of an individual into ideologies of self-

perception and worth is antithetical to the growth and nurture of the racial, ethnic, gender, and sexual identities they inhabit. The fraternalism among Black Americans that engaged in the practices of color prejudice and other intracultural prejudices might very well exist as products of false consciousness that arise out of subconsciously accepting and acting out the dominant culture's belief system of the inferiority of Black Americans. Nevertheless, the reality that one may resist and counteract these ideas and actions requires accountability, rather than merely apologia, by and for social fraternal members who engaged in colorism. BGLOs cultivated and faced similar cultural politics as their foremothers and forefathers in social fraternalism. Large numbers of fairer-skinned members in a few of the Black American Greek societies at Howard in particular, at least until World War I, left them vulnerable to accusations of colorism.¹²

Historically Black colleges such as Bethune-Cookman College (Florida) and Tuskegee Institute (Alabama) did not appear to represent this color and class stigma or stereotype. However, they did prescribe conservative approaches to racism, economic advancement, and cultural politics.¹³ The latter colleges encouraged students to succeed in ways and areas that would not threaten or make waves in the chokehold of racism and segregation in the United States. In contrast, the former college insisted students succeed and surpass what their White counterparts thought they could accomplish academically and monetarily, yet they too did not prescribe radical means to achieve the ends of racial and economic equality. Indeed, political, color, and class divisions in historically Black colleges were microcosmic examples of the larger cultural politics within and between assimilation and accommodation, within which Black America found itself encroached from the late nineteenth to early twentieth centuries.¹⁴ The two competing prescriptions of accommodation and assimilation in social relations were not exact polar opposites in practice. There were in-between positions for Black Americans, characterized by fluctuating and shifting perceptions of what it meant to occupy the subject position of being educated, socially alienated, a racial-ethnic minority, and a part of a diverse culture of people.

For BGLOs, to create a formation radical in its approach to social and cultural discrimination with visible Black American cultural elements would prove to be a challenge at predominantly White *and* Black American institutions. Generational schisms would exist at Howard in particular, where five of the eight BGLOs formed, particularly among older White college administrators, the Black American professorate, and the emerging social and cultural consciousness of younger students. BGLOs experienced the contradiction of many counterformations that emerged in opposition to the dominant: while trying to break apart and distinguish themselves from the prevailing, hegemonic oppressive social and political structures of the larger culture, they too became susceptible to encapsulating the very ideologies they claimed in a collective struggle to resist. The Greek-letter organizations formed at Howard toed the line between conservative liberalism and insurgent activism. By contrast, the groups formed at predominantly White institutions would use the seemingly neutral space of the Greek-letter fraternal to carry on, in secret, bonding, social, and cultural work in an environment that was antithetical to the affirmation of their culture and the cultivation of their intellectual pursuits and development. Still, the complex intertwine of color, class, politics, and education—at least historically—existed within historically Black and predominantly White institutions.

To what degree a large color spectrum was representative of past student populations as a whole is difficult to ascertain, although photos of BGLO chapters in the early twentieth century are found in most university archives and special collections. As with many student organizations and individuals, the aesthetic, political work, and experiences of BGLOs changed over time; no single policy or approach existed, and different historical moments and college affiliations provided different opportunities and visions. The extent to which arbitrary and counterproductive distinctions took place among members of yesteryear lies with an unreachable population, that is, the deceased founders of the organizations. In spite of this, additional oral testimony of members and their collective memories, secondary sources, and hypotheses help put together this color, class, and sexual puzzle.

Norma Boyd, one of the founders of the AKA sorority, claimed that her role and the role of others like her—fair skinned, educated, and wealthy—allowed for a foot in both worlds, Black and White. Boyd considered herself a spy in the world of Whites, who often passed to “come back and report just how the other half does” so that the “darker people of the race” could strategize with them against the perceived enemy within the dominant culture.¹⁵ Historian Deborah Gray White argues that Boyd and other fairer-skinned activists used their position not over, but in solidarity with, their Black brothers and sisters. Nonetheless, Boyd and others who shared her perception on color advantage heightened the criticism of fraternal members.¹⁶ Boyd’s comment may not have been intended as condescending, but it did seem to imply an underlying subtext, that is, that they were inherently special and worthy of praise and celebration for their education, accomplishments, and, sometimes, their color.

In a contemporary context, members of the AKA sorority revealed to me how historical ideas about color, class, and distinction in an era of assumed postsegregation remains. AKA member Pamela, who pledged at a predominantly White institution in the 1990s, points to the various ways these issues are present depending on the college institution, and she sees Spike Lee’s *School Daze* as an exaggeration of these issues. Unlike her sorority sisters of yesteryear, and as a woman who identifies as darker skinned, she feels the sorority is less dependent on using color as distinction or color as a social device. She argues of Black sororities and AKA that

there is the perception that we are elitist—that all of us come from the “right” families and that there is a lot of colorism. However, I think darker women are more represented now and there are women in AKA who look a lot of different ways. The African American sororities today examine their values more closely. Black colleges perhaps participate more in colorism and *School Daze* was an exaggeration to make a point. Today, there is not the paper bag test, but colorism overall is not finished. I, as a dark-skinned woman, probably would not have been accepted into the sorority back in the day.¹⁷

Pamela's self-reflection is not necessarily widely held, but she does account for historical change without concluding that colorism does not exist in BGLOs. Similarly, AKA member Candice, who pledged at one of the University of California college campuses, insinuates that the civil rights movement may have alleviated counterproductive modes of distinction such as color and class, but she is quick to remind that there is a kernel of truth in what she defines as the stereotype of BGLOs. Unlike Pamela, she sees *School Daze* as more than an exaggeration, citing the film as an irresponsible portrayal. In reference to the perception of BGLOs and the film's impact, she proclaims: "People always think we're elitist, color conscious, and bourgeois. I am definitely not like that, nor is our organization. But like all stereotypes there is truth. I think we're beyond that mostly, especially after the civil rights movement. I think the Spike Lee movie [*School Daze*] was irresponsible. There are more pressing issues in the Black community to talk about, we do not need to sit around and worry about skin color. It was definitely a wrong portrayal for this day and age."¹⁸

Candice's point is earnest, but of course, silence about colorism within BGLOs and in existing scholarship about BGLOs does not silence their critics. BGLOs at predominantly White and historically Black institutions may enact various forms of distinction contingent on historical moment and their locations, but both are culpable for enacting transformation in contemporary times. One might argue, therefore, that worrying about and alleviating counterproductive distinction are precisely what all Black organizations must do, in public and in private, in order to make the standard of Black public service and their workers who serve anew.

BGLOs and the Cultural Politics of Class and Sexuality(ies)

Former president of Zeta Phi Beta, Sojourner Jackson, admitted that in the 1930s, when she graduated from a historically Black college, fraternity and sorority membership meant "you were supposed to be above other people . . . at that time if you didn't have the money—if your parents didn't give it to you—you

couldn't get into the organizations."¹⁹ William C. Brown, who is a member of Omega Psi Phi, said that when he pledged in 1939, acceptance into his fraternal meant that he "would be a part of a group of men who were going someplace."²⁰ Agreeing with Brown, Ozell Sutton, former president of Alpha Phi Alpha, claims that even contemporarily, the Black Greek system is "a network that cannot be matched anywhere in the black community."²¹ Brown's and Sutton's statements show a linkage between the past and present and infer an unapologetic sentiment of social and class distinction. In this social context, BGLOs, like White and Black American social fraternals, represent who has cultural capital and social, political, and economic power in their communities. Networking opportunities are surely helpful for members, but for every social circle, those on the margins of that circle exist without access to the professional networking intrinsic to BGLOs. Deborah Gray White describes the double-bind and double-work of Black middle-class formations, observing that since the turn of the twentieth century "classism was inherent in the networking strategy that made the [Black American] middle class the conduit through which resources flowed *into* black communities."²²

Members of these BGLOs may appear at times to succumb to the dominant conceptualization of aesthetics and the capitalist-driven ethos of what sociologist E. Franklin Frazier called their "conspicuous consumption."²³ Frazier noted that the first eight of NPHC BGLOs spent a total of \$2,225,000 in 1952 on cotillions and other social parties. In response, the organizations argue that their lavish parties fund their core civic and community development programs.²⁴ Few members and chapters hold enough independent wealth to fund their local and national community work without fund-raisers, thus the reality of their social aspect and their avowed selfless benevolence no doubt lies somewhere in the middle of both positions. For example, a member of Kappa Alpha Psi noted that he became skeptical of fraternity participation in the late 1970s. After he asked his fraternity chapter to donate money to a scholarship program for Black American students at his university, where he was an athletic coach, the national fraternity granted him \$100 out of a substantial treasury of millions.²⁵ Kappa Alpha Psi's discre-

tionary funding in this case did little to refute Frazier's claims. More pointedly, such examples reveal the slippery distinction between being conscious of the needs of those who are disadvantaged because of class and having a class conscience.

To reach beyond Frazier's description and move toward prescribing a cultural politics of action, cultural critic bell hooks offers a useful outlook and practice for those Black Americans privileged by education and class. Hooks's arguments are useful in reconsidering the role of the class privileged in the nation's past and present for BGLOs and African America. She contends that it is "possible to gain class power without betraying our solidarity toward those without class privilege, by living simply, sharing our resources, and refusing to engage in hedonistic consumerism and the politics of greed."²⁶ Hooks asserts that wealthy Black Americans can reframe their class advantage in solidarity with, rather than at the expense of, other Black Americans. The possibilities and limitations of BGLOs may thus hold lessons for social and cultural formations that fail to merge their rhetoric of class consciousness with personal choices of consumerism and tangible civic work in their communities. A reasonable percentage of AKAs fall within a middle-class socioeconomic bracket; however, their community development work, as shown throughout the remainder of this study, often speaks as loud as their words.

A growing amount of scholarship on the nine BGLOs chronicles their civic engagement work in detail, including my own explication of their activism during the past two centuries published elsewhere, but lesser discussed is the relationship between these organizations and sexual identifications.²⁷ Race work, academic excellence, and community development did not mean that members would overcome other forms of prejudice besides colorism and classism, such as heterosexism. Proclaimed solidarity based on the idea that all Black Americans are in the same social predicament because of racism alone is problematic and elides other forms of discrimination. Cornell West, cultural critic and member of the Alpha Phi Alpha fraternity, argues that for Black Americans, "Racist treatment vastly differs owing to class, gender, sexual orientation, nation, region, hue, and age."²⁸ AKA member and children's book author Jacqueline Woodson explained this in an introspective autobiographical essay in a

1999 issue of *Essence* magazine. Woodson wrote that she will always defend and affiliate with her sorority and remains close to her sorority sisters, but as an “out” lesbian, she often finds the sorority’s emphasis on femininity and, by association, heterosexuality, difficult and privileged criteria. Woodson writes that she and other nonheterosexual women “often feel stereotyped and misunderstood.”²⁹ Fraternalism is a social form predominantly characterized by single-sex socialization and organization, but there is a dominant ethos of heteronormativity and heterosexual courtship encouraged within the fraternal framework as a whole. As a result, the possible role of non-normative sexualities as they intersect with racial identity in BGLOs reveals the limitations and commonalities upon which Black Americans identify.

Woodson’s commentary is descriptive of how the large majority of sororities and fraternities ascribe to normative sexual codes. To understand this, one might consider the racial and class context in which sexualities emerge. In explaining Black American middle-class patrolling of sexuality in general, cultural critic Kobena Mercer writes that rigid sexual morals and conservative attitudes about sexuality among Black people exist in a large part to compensate for racist myths that present Blackness and Black people as sexually and morally depraved.³⁰ Feminist and cultural critic Patricia Hill Collins argues that in a racist and sexist society, heterosexuality, and class advantage for those who identify as heterosexual and economically wealthy, remains one of the few areas to acquire power and retain privilege.³¹ Nonheterosexual fraternal members may find themselves in a precarious position in relation to the performance of gender and sex in these organizations—a performance that remains safely situated within heterosexual frameworks. Thus the fraternal apparatus distinguishes itself in other ways beyond the barriers of class and hue.

Conclusion

BGLOs’ problematic position within the structures of sexual, color, and class domination may call into question the possibilities of seeing AKA as a counterfraternal or counterpublic movement. I argue, however, that such groups can exist as productive

and counterproductive at the same time. When one peels back the mask of propriety that members find necessary, an “innocent Black subject,” to borrow phrasing from sociologist Stuart Hall, is unlikely to live underneath the surface skin.³² There is credence to the accusation of colorism, classism, heteronormativity, and the overall elitism of BGLOs; nonetheless, there were and are differences in how these variables of distinction work within the organizations. Therefore, one can draw careful conclusions about the specificity of BGLOs’ practices. At predominantly White universities, the color and class diversity among members was more apparent, whereas at historically Black colleges, class and color in a seemingly homogenous environment, at least in terms of race, became the way in which they could, and sometimes did, create distinction. On the basis of perceived and material differences of gender, class, sexualities, and color, BGLOs held and exercised various amounts privilege in relation to these shifting identity contexts.

Stuart Hall writes that identity does not exist outside of representation.³³ That is, visual media and views of society may impact how people form and understand their individual and group identities. This crucial idea seems to shape how BGLOs perceive and excuse the limitations of BGLO life, thus in turn shaping how they present and understand their own experiences and cultural politics. The most cursory observation of BGLO chapters in the twenty-first century demonstrates a range of hues; BGLOs claim to embrace nontraditional student participation in the organizations, but they remain largely silent on the issue of sexuality. As the oldest Greek-letter sorority created among Black women, AKA and its social, cultural, and political practices remain at the heart of these discourses of distinction, identity, and power. AKA is not immune to the problems of everyday life hitherto explained. Still, their community development work advocated cultural and political change in the Black public sphere. AKA’s ability to realize counterpublic-sphere work through their actions shows an ongoing commitment to provide clarity between BGLOs’ image in popular culture, as seen in *Stomp the Yard* and *School Daze*, their own past and current self-representation through cultural practices and politics, and representative action in the Black public sphere.